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THE OPERATIONS OF B COMPANY AND OF
THE 1ST BATTALION, 116TH INFANTRY
(29TH INFANTRY DIVISION) ON THE
ELLE RIVER AND AT COUVAINS, NORTH
OF ST. LO, FRANCE, 12-13 JUNE, 1944
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: COMPANY ASSAULT
AND BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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THE OPERATIONS OF B COMPANY AND OF
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of B Company and of the 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry, 29th US Division, at the crossing of the Elie River and the capture of the village of Couvains, North of St. Lo, 12-13 June, 1944, in the battle for Normandy, France.

The specific action referred to was a critical local development in the expansion of V Corps' Omaha Beach. This beachhead was one of three major lodgements on the Continent of Europe made on 6 June 1944 as the culmination of an extensive aerial campaign and a combined airborne and amphibious assault. The assault began the primary ground action of Operation Overlord, that operation which climaxed Allied preparation for the major offensive aimed at the swift and complete destruction of military Germany.(1)

Operation Overlord was conceived when the Allied governments had given priority in their global struggle to an offensive against Germany. (2) It was more definitely projected when sufficient materiel and units were available in the Theater, or ready for shipment in the Zone of the Interior, to make such an offensive feasible. (3) England provided an excellent marshalling area at the end of the shortest line of communications from America's Atlantic ports, a line that could be easily switched to Northwest France. Additional Ground, Air and Naval factors combined to support the decision to base Overlord in England and direct it at France.(4)

(1,2) A-1, par.3, p.1; (3) A-2, p. 56; (4) A-1, pars. 16-34.

General (now General of the Army) Eisenhower arrived in England in January 1944 to assume supreme command of the Allied Expeditionary Forces assembling there, with the directive, "You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other Allied Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces." (5)

Currently, Russia's reoccupation of some of her territory in the face of a diverted German force was being given much prestige. (6) The partial reduction of Hitler's Italian redoubt by Allied forces had mostly secured the Mediterranean passage, but seemed to lead to no quick victory against the concentric rings of the German Italian defenses. (7)

Across the Channel from England there was a powerful German army facing North along the coastline at the end of short interior lines. (8) The miscalculation of the German high command in anticipating General Eisenhower's effort in the Pas de Calais area (See Map A) had resulted in major concentrations there at the expense of the Western Channel coast, where few beaches breeched the rocky sea-cliffs. (9) Additionally, Hitler's conception of the Festung Europa as an impenetrable fortress had led to the transfer of vast quantities of excellent fighting men from mobile striking units to positioned coastal garrisons. (10) Von Rundstedt, commander in the West, was replaced by Von Kluge when the general fated to become the Wehrmacht's Pickett balked at this Hitler-Rommel doctrine, insisting instead that available troops should be grouped in a compact, mobile force capable of striking any Allied landing before it could achieve an adequate build-up. (11) But Hitler had his way, and such units as were stationed in Northwest France were widely deployed. (12)

(5) A-2, p.56; (6) A-2, par.6, p.7; (7) A-2, p.50; (8) A-3, pp.3-7; (9) A-1, p.8; (10) A-3, pp.3-7; (12) A-2, p.6.

To exploit the error of the German strategic disposition and the immobility of their tactical dispersion, intense and protracted aerial bombardment was planned to isolate the beach area and delay the concentration of an efficient German counter-force, thus denying the enemy the maximum use of interior routes, and insuring the Allies time to build-up.(13)

In the immediate vicinity of the projected beachheads the severest Allied pressure would be necessary, not only to gain depth and strategic points, but to take advantage of the enemy dispersion and prevent a counter-build-up by requiring the prompt commitment of such German reinforcements as became available so soon as they reached the battle area.(14)

The stubborn continuation of the local offensive during the Allied build-up would, in fact, burn up a powerful German army piecemeal. This course of events had been foreseen and planned for when General Eisenhower's forces struck across the Channel at Normandy in June, 1944.(15) (See Map A)

GENERAL SITUATION

When the Allied ground forces debarqued on the Continent under the command of Field Marshal Montgomery there was a three-fold immediate objective: to secure a beachhead, to secure a port, and to develop inland to positions favorable to further assault.(16)

(See Map B) The American forces under Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley (now General), commanding the First Army, made two major landings, ^{the first} at Utah Beach, West of the mouth of the Vire, under Maj.Gen. J. Lawton Collins, VII Corps commander; and ^{the second} at Omaha Beach, East of the mouth of the Vire and closest to the British landings North of Bayeux, under Maj.Gen. Leonard T. Gerow (now Lieutenant General), V Corps commander.(17)

(13) A-2, pp.60-61; (14) A-3, par.3,p.10; (15) A-3, pp.10-11;
(16) A-1, p.24; (17) A-3, pp.12-13.

- The assault forces at Omaha were organized as Task Force O, under Maj.Gen. Clarence R. Huebner.(17a) The primary assault elements were made up mostly of the 16th and 116th Infantries, from the 1st and 29th Divisions, respectively, each of which reduced its sector of the beach with such losses and with such difficulty that the local German commander notified his superiors at 1300 hrs that the invasion was stopped at the water's edge.(18) Groups of American riflemen, however, had already sapped through the dike, and in the afternoon the German beach defenses collapsed, or rather, were destroyed, bitter and isolated little battles being fought on the inland bluff between the few *brèches*.(19)

Though the forward elements had made their way at darkness scarcely beyond hand-grenade range of the sands, they were in the fortunate position of having penetrated the enemy main line of resistance and groping through the shattered coastwall shell into the abdomen of the Wehrmacht.(20) Hitler's and Rommel's tactics had exacted a heavy fee, but crack German units, stocked with superior fighting men, had been destroyed in positioned defense.(21)

It is interesting to note that in spite of Rommel's Army Group's strict application of the coast-wall dogma it had been impossible to maintain adequate garrisons at even the few good assault beaches in the inviting Cotentin area. For example, Utah Beach was comparatively lightly held and weakly defended.(22) By contrast, Omaha was as impregnable as man and nature could make it (without removing the beach altogether), and was additionally reinforced with the local striking division.(23) In spite of this, the force landed was sufficient unto the task.

After destroying the fighting effectiveness of the vestiges of the garrison, General Gerow's forces were in a position to

(17a) A-4, p.5; (18) A-4, p.113; (19) Personal Knowledge;
(20) A-4, pp.107-111; (21) A-4, p.110; (22) A-3, pp.22-23;
(23) A-4, pp.1-113.

exploit a penetration to the limit of their resources, which resources had been building up on the beach in the tracks of the first riflemen. On the evening of 6 June most of two divisions was ashore, and V Corps headquarters had landed and become operational on the Far Shore. (24) Troops poured inland across the wreckage of flesh and equipment on Omaha to exploit the success of the landing teams. This exploitation was aimed at linking the three beachheads into a consolidated holding, at destroying as many Germans as possible, and at obtaining positions favorable to further development. (25)

The left flank of the 16th Infantry and the Commandos on the right flank of the British converged through each other's beaten zones to destroy the last Germans between their sectors. (26) (See 1, Map B) Fresh regiments lunged inland through a welter of the fighting fragments of German combat units and a mongrel horde of service troops. It is stimulating in retrospect to remember the conduct of the remnants of the 352d German Division, single soldiers of which defended stone farmhouses to their last round and last breath, while herds of conscripted international riffraff were marching in to surrender.

Maj.Gen. Charles H. Gerhardt, commanding the 29th Infantry Division, assumed the responsibility for General Gerow's right flank at 1700 hrs, 7 June, when his headquarters reassumed command of the battered 116th Infantry. (27) (See 2, Map B) The 115th Infantry, which had landed as a support element in Task Force O, had already marched inland beyond the coastal highway, and was facing Southward along the flooded basin of the Aure River. (28) (See 3, Map B) The third regiment of the 29th, the 175th Infantry, had followed through, capturing LaCambe on this main highway, and advancing West to capture Isigny between the forks of the Vire and

(24) A-5, p.66; (25) A-5, pp.72-74; (26) A-4, p.121; (27,28) A-4,p.127.

Aure, and to secure the bridges across these streams.(29)
(See 4 and 5, Map B) Contact with the glider troops of the 101st Airborne Division, facing Southeast from Utah beach, was made by the 29th Reconnaissance Troop patrolling beyond the Vire,(30) (See 6, Map B) and when the positions around Carentan,(See 7, Map B) West of the river had been developed, the Allies possessed a consolidated beachhead, enclosing the lateral coastal highway from a point West of Caen to General Collins' foothold on the way to Cherbourg.(31)

Though the capture and consolidation of Carentan did not come till days later, General Gerow's right flank was secured by the wide waters of the Vire, and his left by the link-up with the British.

The British forces had landed with the immediate objective of Bayeux, (See 8, Map B) which they had quickly seized, and the aim of securing Caen and bridgeheads across the Orne River, and developing South and East.(32) (See 9, Map B)

German command saw its main danger in this threat, and concentrated against it, counter-attacking to contain the British West of Caen. (See 10, Map B) Additionally, they struck the left flank of the rapid British advance to the South.(33) (See 11, Map B)

General Gerow, reinforced by the 2d Infantry Division, which he committed between the 1st and 29th, (See Division Symbols, Map B) took maximum advantage of the immediate weakness of the enemy before him to carve out a large salient thrusting into the heart of Normandy.(34) He moved his divisions Southward in a sudden surge, and a well organized rear area, with excellent routes of communication, materialized behind them. V Corps found itself fighting an organized war, with a clearly delineated front

(29) A-4, pp.127-128;(30) A-4, Map No. XIV; (31) A-4, pp.156-157; (32) A-4, p.5; (33,34) A-4, p.143.

- and a rear processing supplies from an improvised port.(35)

The forward elements advanced rapidly, chewing off quickly digested stretches of the Seventh German Army's LXXXIVth Corps sector.(See successive front lines, Map B) On the left the 1st Division had cut the Caen-St. Lo highway 12 June before a hastily grouped German force contained this advance immediately South of Caumont on 13 June (See 12, Map B) and pounded the flanking British advance back (See 11, Map B) into a NE-SW oblique line from the 1st Division's left East of Caumont to the stubborn deadlock West of Caen.(36) The 2d and 29th Divisions shared the first easy success of the ~~Red One~~ ^{XI}, and the 2d swept through the Forest of Cerisy into the hedge-locked valley of the Elle.(37) (See 13, Map B) The 175th Infantry, 29th Division, its right comfortable on the Vire, slipped forward into the elbow of the Elle and Vire, providing the salient with a sound flank. (See 14, Map B) This regiment threw patrols across the Vire into the rear of the Germans facing the extreme left of VII Corps (See 15, Map B), but there was little success and no major action here.(38) The 115th Infantry of the 29th crossed the flooded Aure basin with no opposition and plunged across the minor hill mass between the Aure valley and the narrow, shallow trough of the Elle.(39) (See 16, Map B) The only fighting during this passage was a meeting engagement with a withdrawing hostile party disastrous for one battalion of the 115th. (40) (See 17, Map B)

At this point the 1st Division continued the easy forward movement to Caumont alone. The 2d and 29th ran into the German build-up moving North from St. Lo.(41) This new and aggressive German front followed the crescent of the Elle River as it curved Northwest from the area West of Caumont.(See Map B) This crescent moated Hill 192, East of St. Lo, and a line of villages North of the city as it flowed across the 29th front into the Vire.

(35) A-4, p.131; (36) A-4, Map No.XV; (37) A-4, p.141; (38) A-4, p.145; (39) A-4, p.145; (40) A-4, pp.144-145; (41) A-4, p.153.

LOCAL SITUATION

The Historical Division study Omaha Beachhead states of V Corps' 11 and 12 June operations, "The main effort toward Caumont, involving the 1st Division and the 9th Infantry of the 2d Division, reached its objectives with only slight difficulty. To the West the 29th Division and the 38th Infantry of the 2d Division met a type of enemy resistance which spelled the end of the rapid advances made since 7 June. The Germans defended the approaches to Hill 192 with a vigor proving the importance they attached to St. Lo, committing in this area the first considerable reinforcements to be used against V Corps. Although the Elle River was a small, fordable stream, its crossing involved a number of bitterly contested actions."(42)

The attainment of the Elle, therefore, marked the conclusion of the easy exploitation that followed the breaching of the coastal fortifications. It also demonstrated the re-organization of the LXXXIVth Corps into an effective fighting force determined to hold the St. Lo sector and keep the Americans thrust back until a major force for a counter-attack could be mustered within the air isolation belt. That this effort was blocked was due to the immediate and resolute action of V Corps in converting a recoil into a stubborn offensive, and incidentally, to the successful breaching of the so-called Elle River Line.

This "line" lasted less than 24 hours, but was so clearly traced by the course of the Elle and marked such a definite change in the nature of the operations that the narrow little creek in its hedge-walled groove assumed Rhine-like proportions in the minds of the American soldiers who spent a bad day and night along its banks. And although the Germans possibly desired a positioned defence⁵ here no more than the Americans desired to exchange mobility for a siege, (43) it is very likely that the enemy's limited resources might have (42) A-4, p.153; (42) A-4, p.130.

led him to develop the successes of numerous local counter-attacks (culminating in excellent positions on the South bank of the Elbe) into a consolidated line of strongpoints aimed at holding the American advance till help arrived, or until the reinforcements arriving in groups could be held and organized into a force capable of striking a major blow. That the American assault continued necessitated the piecemeal commitment of these reinforcements, and was an important factor in preventing a large-scale counter-offensive prior to the American's readiness to meet it.(44) Von Rundstedt, back in the saddle, struck too late with too little at Mortain.(44a)

On 11 and 12 June the left of the Beachhead assumed the shape it was to hold with little change for over a month.(See Map B) To sketch the situation briefly, from their battle West of Caen the British held an oblique line running Southwest to the left of the 1st Division, which had cut the Caen-St. Lo highway at Caumont. From the 1st Division's right the 9th Infantry, 2d Division, held an oblique line running Northwest toward the bulge of the Elbe.(45) (See 18, Map B) On the evening of 11 June the 38th Infantry on the 2d Division's right flank, and the 29th Division settled along the Northern bank of the Elbe, curving to conform to the crescent of the river.(46)

The 38th Infantry fronted Hill 192. The 115th Infantry, on the 29th's left, was astride what was to be the main St. Lo axis, and the 175th, holding the Division and Corps right, had settled firmly in the Northern elbow of the Vire and Elbe, covering the St. Lo-Isigny road bridge and the Vire-washed flank. (See 20 and 21, Map B) To its rear elements of the 2d Armored Division had been committed to hold the Vire bridges and make contact with General Collins' VII Corps across the estuary.(47) (See 5 and 7, Map B)

The minor hill mass between the Aure and Elbe, bounded to the West by the Vire and to the East by the Forest of Cerisy, sloped down

(44) A-4, p.161; (44a) A-6, pp.125-127; (45) A-4, Map No.XV;
(46) A-4, Map No. XIV; (47) A-4, p.156.

to relatively flat ground for some distance North of the Elle. Bushy-topped hedgerows and woods (typical of the Norman bocage) concealed and covered the excellent approaches to the forward positions on the North bank. It was all an attacker could ask. The advantage of Hill 192 was more than neutralized by the concealment if it were properly utilized. The American-held shelf South of Epernay-Tesson (See Map B) provided an abrupt, brief forward slope in the North bank, naked of any concealment in the Couvains road area. (48)

The South Bank and the country behind it was just as excellent for the defender. Normandy has been described as a fortress created by God for the German soldier, as well as a house-to-house fight with no reef. The well-organized German position facing the 115th and commanding the bridge on the road to Couvains, half way point on the road to St. Lo, and the position covering the bridge on the St. Lo-Isigny road, in front of the 175th Infantry, were hedgerow bastions. There is little terrain, however, be it ever so favorable to the enemy, that does not afford some compensating advantages. This is as true of the hedgerows as it is any other part of the world. Terrain disadvantages are like the enemy in the rear of General Forrest's command. "If they're in back of ourn, we're in back of theirs." Some of these compensations were demonstrated in the final successful attack across the Elle.

(See Map C) A lateral macadam road, just behind the crest of the South bank, ran from St. Jean-de-Savigny, at the East boundary of the 29th, to St. Clair-sur-l'Elle, beyond the crossing the Germans were defending in front of the 175th. Between these two villages, at a point where the Couvains road crossed this little lateral road, was a third village, a very small one, Le Menil. Masked by the crest and concealed by the bushy tree-tops, it was immediately behind the
(48) Personal Knowledge.

the forward slope the Germans had organized to defend the crossing. There were two crossings at St. Jean, one leading from the 29th sector and one from the Forest of Cerisy in the 2d Division's sector. St. Jean was also organized. The South bank between these three redoubts was held by an GPLR, exceptionally strong between Le Menil and St. Clair. To the rear, at Couvains, the enemy had a well-armed reserve which could strike along roads to St. Clair, ~~La Calvaire~~, or St. Jean. (49) Couvains had its own garrison, the whole system involving about a regiment, reinforced. Two roads led rearward from Couvains, one to La Calvaire (between Hill 192 and St. Lo, on the St.Lo-Bayeux road), and one Southwest to join the road which ran through the 175th Infantry's positions, across the Elle past St. Clair and directly into St. Lo.

(See Map B) The Germans across the river from the 2d Division were similarly organized, and both division sectors were commanded by the high ground of Hill 192. (50)

This elevation, rising above the rolling hedge-row country, commanded the approaches to St. Lo. Its vantage was an additional threat to the 1st Division salient. Its capture was a necessary preliminary to the capture of St. Lo. It finally fell on 11 July, exactly a week before the fall of St. Lo. (51)

On 12 June the East Salient formed as already described. On the 2d Division's right the 23rd Infantry was ordered to move through the 38th Infantry, cross the Elle and capture Hill 192. (52) In the 29th sector the 175th Infantry was to hold fast, while the 115th crossed the Elle and seized Couvains, (See 22, Map B) securing

(49) The picture of the German Couvains defence network is put together from personal experience, conversations at Couvains with personnel of the 2d and 3rd Battalions, 116th, and the 3rd Battalion 115th, and source material referred to, and undisputed by my reference A-7. The same is true of the attacks of the 115th, also see A-4, pp. 154-155; (50) A-4, p.154; (51) See A-6; (52) A-4, p.153.

the right flank of the 23rd and obtaining the vantage ground of the little center of macadam lanes and roads for a further attack on St. Lo itself.(53)

The 23rd moved out on schedule, attacking South and West across the river with first two, and later with three, battalions. (See 22, Map B) Early gains were lost when the ghost of the defending 352d German Division was supported with small, compact groups of German paratroopers who threw the 23rd back to its line above the Elle by close-in fire-fighting among the hedge-rows, and with expertly adjusted spot concentrations of artillery.(54)

FAILURE OF THE 115TH.

(See Map C) To the West the 115th Infantry fared worse. The 2d Battalion of this regiment was in reserve, attempting to absorb unto itself the hundred-odd replacements assigned after the disastrous meeting engagement referred to earlier. The 1st Battalion was ordered to attack across the river on the Couvains road, seize St. Clair and develop to the South. The 3rd Battalion was to cross between Le Menil and St. Jean and seize Couvains.(54a)

The Le Menil strongpoint was on the forward slope commanding the river. As it was viewed from the North the slope appeared to be completely overgrown. It was compartmented with the thick earthen walls of the hedges, from four to six feet high, each sprouting a natural chevaux-de-frize.* These growths and the spreading tops of the trees ceilinged the slope. The slope, except for the overgrown river bank was clear and grassy in hedged fields. In these fields isolated shrub growths furnished close concealment for positions, such isolated growths being impossible to discern through the bushy tops of the trees. The Germans could see through their own concealment perfectly to observe the American forward slope. The Germans were dug in behind the loopholed hedgerows with mortars, machine-guns, very light howitzers and anti-tank guns.(55)

(53) A-4, p.154; (54) A-4, 155; (54a) A-4, p.154; (55) Personal Knowledge.

* Should have been explained
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The little stone bridge this position commanded had not been blown, nor mined, nor did it appear subsequently to be wired. This indicates the Germans built up here after a hasty withdrawal and after the Americans already had the bridge covered with fire. (56)

At 0500 on 12 June the 1st Battalion, 115th, moved to the attack here, but it hardly cleared the hedgerows of its LD before automatic, mortar and shellfire forced it back and pinned it in its positions. To the left the 3rd Battalion moved out at the same time, coming under heavy artillery fire and failing in the initial attempt to cross in spite of the support of four battalions (plus) of artillery and its mortars. After probing along the river, this battalion burst across through the outpost line West of St. Jean, and advanced into the hedgerows in the direction of Couvains. A German column, the mobile reserves, came up to meet it, and supported by mortars and SP guns, moved in on the flanks and began cutting the battalion to pieces. Threatened with isolation and disorganized the battalion fell apart. In the early afternoon K and I Companies broke away from the fight and streamed back North of the river. The rest of the Battalion filtered back in dribblets and confused little groups for the remainder of the day. The successful escape of most of the unit (even though losses had been severe) in such a complete rout does not indicate too strong an enemy force in the counter-attack.

At noon ^{the} Division ^{Commander}, wishing to regain the momentum of the attack reinforced the 1st Battalion with two platoons of the 747th Tank Battalion, and another effort to force the little stone bridge was made, with the support of what approximated five battalions of artillery.

This attempt was abortive. The tanks moved out first and were stopped by flat-^{TRAJECTORY} firing guns from concealed positions on the German's forward slope. A tank which was still burning on the bridge at twilight marked the limit of this advance and effectively blocked (56) A-7.

the crossing for vehicles. Three tanks had been lost attempting to force this defile and the infantry hardly stirred forward before it was driven back.

In the late afternoon elements of the 3rd Battalion were collecting themselves North of the river on the left. The 1st Battalion squatted astride the Couvains road, the 747th Tanks wisely considered any further effort to force a fire-covered bridge with armor to be useless, and the 2d Battalion rested in reserve.

THE COMMITMENT OF THE 116TH INFANTRY.

Omaha Beachhead devotes two double-columned pages to unsuccessful efforts to lodge a force South of the Elbe and to the crystallization of the German one-day "Elbe River Line". It devotes two sentences to the successful effort, "Alerted at 1630 the 116th Infantry took over the attack in the evening. At 2200 it had two battalions across the Elbe, and the 3rd Battalion of the 115th (now attached to the 116th) had recrossed the river." (57) In a study of such scope that is very likely all the space the operation merited.

The successful incision of this German position with about thirty men, the follow-up with a complete regiment (reinforced), and the subsequent dissolution of the German defenses North of St. Lo to a depth of several miles was accomplished with such ease that fighting qualities were not severely taxed. (58) It is also true that a regimental commander, exercising rigid control of his subordinate units, made a break-through and accomplished a minor exploitation that cut the distance to St. Lo in half between supper and lunch. It was to take more than a month to cross the intervening three miles and enter the city. (59)

(57) A-4, p.155; (58) Personal Opinion; (59) A-6, p.115.

Additionally, this brief operation was conducted in the face of the reinforced, reorganized LXXXIVth Corps fighting with the superb soldiers who were to turn every hedgerow South of Couvains and the slopes of Hill 192 into a bloody shambles.(60)

It was neither difficult nor costly. In the operation B Company, 116th, lost one man killed, two men wounded and one officer wounded.(61)

The operation acquires a certain significance, however, when one considers the previous unsuccessful effort, the fact that the Germans reported the fighting as "bitter", the signal local defeat of the freshly committed German reserves, the tactical gain of so quickly securing the ground and the road network from which the final slow drive on St. Lo was developed, the flanking threat to the Germans facing the 2d Division, and the denial of even one night of grace for the hard-pressed enemy.

To glance at the Norman history of the 116th, it had cleared the right half of Omaha Beach on a two-battalion front, the 1st and 2d Battalions, the landing teams, suffering heavily. The 1st lost four company commanders killed and one wounded, and half the battalion staff killed. Three company executive officers were casualties. A Company, the evening of D Day, consisted of one second lieutenant and seven men; B Company of one second lieutenant and less than forty men (subsequently reinforced with one second lieutenant from the rear party and one second lieutenant from battalion headquarters); C Company, which had battered over the beach, up the bluff and into Vierville-sur-Mer with fewest losses, had two lieutenants and about seventy percent of its men; D Company consisted of a mortar section, a machine gun section and two second lieutenants.(62)

While the other two regiments of the 29th exploited the breakthrough of the beach-line with the conspicuous and easy captures of La Cambe and Isigny with their invulnerable thousands, the 116th was (60) Personal Knowledge; (61) Personal Knowledge; (62) One A Company team, rescued from a sinking craft, came in a week late.-A-7.

assigned the dull, messy job of cleaning out the concrete hedgehogs and organized perimeters along the coast and the East bank of the Vire estuary. Except for the marauding remnants of the 352d cut off in this area, to whom the tiny 1st Battalion seemed an irresistible magnet, these strongpoints contained the only Germans North of the Aure who were standing their ground.(63)

Working with the 2d and 5th Rangers, the 116th relieved the Ranger detachment which had landed at Point du Hoc (this relief nearly developed into a tragic fiasco), reduced Grand-camps les Bains on the coast, and hedgehogs commanding the mouth of the Vire North of Isigny, in the area of Maisy and Gefosse Fontenay. During this time B Company was allotted a few rear party men, and A Company was patched into a recognizable unit with a few headquarters personnel, anti-tank gunners whose guns had been blown up on the beach, rear party personnel and a few men from C Company.(64)

On 11 June the regiment moved across the Aure in Division reserve and bivouaced in the hills. On 12th June, canteens splashing with cider, the 116th marched down out of the hills and assembled during the late afternoon in an area around Epernay Tesson, near a lateral highway North of the Elle and adjacent to the North-South axis of the Couvains road.(65)

At 1630 Col. Charles D. Canham (now Brigadier General), regimental commander, was given his warning order to prepare to take over the attack, with slightly less than six hours of the long spring daylight left. Shortly after 1700 his battalion commanders were passing on his briefing on the situation. Information received from Division still referred vaguely to a battalion of the 115th holding a hedgerow "Alamo" South of the river! (63) A-4, p.130; (64), 65) Personal Knowledge.

This information was corrected prior to the attack. Intelligence was that the 115th was holding the North bank of the Elle, and the Germans, well organized, were entrenched on the South bank. The 116th would move out in column of battalions South from Epernay Tesson on the Couvains road, 2d, 1st and 3rd. The regiment would break through the river positions and attack on a two battalion front, the 2d to seize St. Clair and the 1st to seize Couvains.(66) (See Map B)

Lt. Col. Metcalfe, commanding the 1st Battalion, directed his command to move out in a column of companies, C, B, A and D; The aid station and ammunition supply point would move in vehicles at the rear of the battalion column till the regimental column was formed at the church in Epernay Tesson. Thereafter they would be in train at the rear of the regimental column. Radio silence. Initially Lt. Col. Metcalfe would be with C Company.(67)

B Company assembled in readiness. It consisted of two platoons, each commanded by an officer; a weapons section commanded by a sergeant; and a command group consisting of a first sergeant, a communication sergeant, a radio operator, a messenger and the company commander, who was a second lieutenant. The 1st platoon consisted of two squads, of seven and six men, and the platoon leader, Lt. Taylor, who was also company executive; the 2d platoon consisted of two squads of five and six men, and the platoon leader, Lt. Varadian. Each platoon had one BAR and several grenade launchers. The weapons section consisted of a section leader, Sgt. "Toad" Smith, a mortar gunner and assistant, a rocketeer, and a machine gunner and assistant. Equipment was one bazooka with two rounds (one man load), a mortar tube, base plate and six rounds (two man load), a light machine-gun and two boxes of ammunition (two man load). This left the section leader free to maintain a (66) A-7. (67) Personal Knowledge.

company straggler line. Each rifleman carried two to three bandoliers of ammunition and several grenades, and each had one can of C rations, a canteen of cider, and extra first aid packets and sulphur pills. Many carried a rifle grenade each for the launchers.

The attack SOP was 1st Platoon right, 2d left, with the 1st Sergeant maintaining the weapons section in the rear until it was sent for or until the sergeant considered someone needed unpinning. The "300" radio (the only radio in the company) was too valuable to risk forward, and stayed with the 1st Sergeant.

The company commander, with his messenger, operated between and slightly to the rear of the two platoons, in vocal contact with the interior flanks. Loss of this contact in the hedgerows was costly and time-killing, but so difficult to maintain unbroken that a good messenger was vital. The company messenger was resourceful, intelligent and illiterate. It was the responsibility of the 1st Sergeant to keep the company commander in view. When the communication sergeant was not occupied on a resupply mission or in extending the 1st Sergeant's observation forward, he assisted the weapons sergeant as company guide.

This formation was compact for the purposes of control in the close hedgerow country, for the immediate availability of either platoon for the relief of the other from automatic fire, and so that the weapons could be brought to bear without endangering a lost formation. In big fields the platoons worked inside opposing vertical hedgerows, with the weapons covering the forward lateral hedgerow. In small fields the platoons worked the outer hedgerows of adjoining fields while the weapons waited where the intervening hedgerow joined the rear lateral barrier. Experience had demonstrated penny gun fights on the flanks should be avoided and the "bull through" technique used

until the primary objective was beyond the last stretch of open ground. This was to be assaulted- after artillery, if available. Local supporting weapons were to be employed only in emergency, as they seldom found the invisible, earth-protected, quick-moving enemy, and did draw quick shell and mortar fire. Area artillery was the rifleman's best friend.

This formation was also well adapted to pulling out of a tight spot and looking for the soft flank. The hedgerows, like any terrain deterrent, had compensations to balance their disadvantages for the attacker. This formation was intended to take advantage of these compensations, to work the "bull through" (that cautious ignoring of the diverting light fire on the flanks so prevalent in close country), to pull out of the trap, to sense the main force of the enemy and close with him before he could pull out over the next hedgerow and leave it all to be done over again.

Obviously this is a standard formation, and it is necessary only to emphasise the close visual and vocal contact maintained, as would be natural in any close country. But it is interesting to note that in its first operation after it was brought up to strength the company operated on the wide open, platoon mission principle and was decimated and pinned down; the next day, back to its two small platoons and weapons section formation, it attacked and destroyed a company of German paratroopers.

Also this formation is described because the ^{Company} ~~enemy~~ was thrown into a frontal attack on an organized position with no time for a company commander's order, and the company's ability to assume the formation amidst the greatest confusion was an essential element in the successful crossing of the Elbe. It is not presented as a novelty.

At approximately 1800 the battalion was ordered to move out, (68)

(68) A-7

and take its place in the approach march, which it joined on the lateral highway through Epernay Tesson, and turned Southward down the Couvains road toward the sustained noise of automatic and shellfire. (See Map B)

Near the church in Epernay Tesson, B Company, and the 1st Battalion to the best of my knowledge, had its first SIW. The soldier concerned was a squad-leader acting-sergeant. This man had a steady unimaginative nature, had demonstrated superior qualities, and had performed several individual missions requiring self reliance and courage. The company commander, as soon as the man was helped off to the aid station, began conducting an investigation, more pour encourager les autres than with any intention to fix guilt. The soldiers, in their eagerness to establish the incident as an accident, worked themselves into an emotional state of self righteousness and devotion to duty with enthusiastic protestations and platitudes, which might support the Catholic tenet of the oft repeated prayer. This did much to dispel the feeling of resentment at being hauled out to join an attack on a position that had repelled powerful formations when the men knew they belonged to the most shot-up battalion in the Division. However, in the opinion of the company commander, this was outweighed by the loss of a valuable man. But since about a third of the men had slight wounds, the incident and the subsequent protestations may have served to stop a sudden rush on the aid station.

The road South was straight and of secondary black metal. Concealment was excellent, with bushy-topped woods on either side, and an almost indistinguishable rise, culminating in the crest of the Northern bank, preventing observation along most of the road.

The regimental column worked slowly along the road in to the

* SELF INFLICTED WOUND

* FRENCH - for the encouragement of the others.

widely dispersed beaten zones of numerous automatic weapons, and into an area of sporadic and poorly placed mortar concentrations and shellfire.

At this time the regimental commander was forward in an OP ^{which commanded the} ~~commanding~~ the river. He had secured an additional artillery allotment, which though it did not increase much the previous support assigned to cover the crossing, did give him what approximated six battalions of artillery. Under the co-ordination of div-arty headquarters, this fire was being carefully massed and registered. The regimental commander had determined on a surprise concentration followed immediately by a small ^s assault force to secure lodgement on the Southern bank and follow the concentration up the hill. (69) I say "concentration" rather than rolling barrage, for the artillery fire, when it came, did not roll up the hill. Rather, it came down repeatedly in one place, came down again slightly further up the hill, and so moved over the Southern crest. During the firing there were brief, but clearly defined breaks.

The 2d Battalion, 116th, was deployed left and right of the road, and F Company was in positions commanding the bridge and engaging the heavy automatic fire from the South bank. (70) The 1st Battalion companies knew nothing of this at the time, and realized only that they were following the 2d in readiness to support and develop an attack.

As the 2d Battalion deployed, the 1st moved forward into an area well covered with ~~the~~ plunging fire, and where mortars maintained a fairly steady coverage. B Company moved off the road into the hedged orchards, maintaining contact with C and A Companies on the road.

The word was passed along the column to hold up, and the companies found cover in the hedges left of the road and waited, B Company in a field just North of a minor black-topped road
(69) A-7; (70) A-7.

perpendicular to the Couvains road.

Meanwhile C Company moved forward out of immediate contact. At about 2000 hrs a battalion messenger brought word to close up with C Company, and Baker^{*} moved out across the little East-West road. The men entered a series of open fields well covered with plunging fire and beaten with mortar and shell bursts. They crossed this area at the double with no casualties, and collided with the rear of C Company where a tiny trail led into a narrow, shallow draw walled in with high hedgerows. One well-placed mortar round would have done massacre in the draw, but no one was disposed to remain in the open area to the rear. B Company crowded into the draw, where C company had already congested, and pushed their way through a gap into a field on the left. Here the men assembled, seeking cover from flat fire by crouching behind hedgerows. The enemy "interdictory" belt was to the rear.

There was a great deal of curiosity among the men as to what^{//} went with the situation. They could see, in the field immediately to their front, riflemen firing over the forward hedgerows. No one knew the draw went past one more field and debouched abruptly onto the naked slope of the Northern bank.

THE LE MENIL ASSAULT (See Map C)

The company messenger was sent to report the position to the battalion commander, but the messenger returned and said Lt. Col. Metcalfe was up in front of C Company talking to Col. Canham. B. Company Commander left the field and found C Company Commander in the draw and asked him if he knew what was going to happen, and if the 2d Battalion was still going to conduct the attack. C Company Commander said Lt. Col. Metcalfe was forward at the mouth of the draw, and had passed back no orders as yet.

*Co B 116 INF.

B Company Commander went forward to find the battalion commander and report the location of B Company, and found Lt. Col. Metcalfe with the regimental commander, whose arm was still in a sling from a D Day wound, at the mouth of the draw and looking across the river toward the wooded slope erupting steadily with white tracer. There was heavy American small arms fire along the hedges left and right.

B Company Commander, being joined by his messenger, moved forward to Lt. Col. Metcalfe, who said, "Wait here a minute."

Col. Canham, with Maj. Thomas D. Howie, his S-3, (71) was studying the German positions intently, and at this moment the whole Southern edge of the river blew up in a solid sheet of flame. It entirely blotted out any indication of hostile fire. The awaited concentration had landed exactly on the waters edge from a point West of the bridge, plainly visible from the mouth of the draw, to a point a couple of hundred yards to the East. This fire was beautifully laid. There seemed a minimum of dispersion.

The fire came down again, and Col. Canham called out, "Tell them to move out or they are going to lose that fire."

There was some shouting and movement in the fields adjoining the draw, but no one advanced down the slope. The men in these positions had been engaging an extremely active enemy, and had been in touch with the 115th riflemen who had attempted to move against the massed automatic fire of the enemy twice previously. There was a period of shuffling natural in men who wanted to see if the fire was actually silenced.

Col. Canham turned to Lt. Col. Metcalfe and asked him if he had a company handy. The Battalion commander called B Company Commander, who had begun to move back into the draw with his messenger.

(71) A-7. Major Howie's funeral in St. Lo won him fame as the "Major of St. Lo."

Col. Canham stated, "They can have those Krauts now, but if they wait they're going to get killed." He then asked B Company Commander where his company was, and B Company was pointed out. The colonel said, "Get them across the river and follow that fire up the hill. Your battalion will follow you up."

The company messenger was immediately sent back into the draw, and Lt. Col. Metcalfe pointed to a spot directly opposite.

"Go straight across and up. There is a village at the top. I will see you there. Use your radio on the objective." This village was Le Menil. Lt. Col. Metcalfe recommended the company ford the river.

Since the men had retained the D Day horror of floundering in water, the company commander asked permission to cross the bridge, and was warned not to let anyone take shelter behind the burning tank. Lt. Col. Metcalfe added the information that there were no Americans left South of the river.

Col. Canham ordered B Company Commander to bring the company on forward. The heavy wall of fire had moved slightly from the water's edge, but was still bursting at the foot of the slope. The company commander found the men preparing to move into the draw, where much of A Company had packed in with C Company, creating a denser congestion. B Company Commander returned to the mouth of the draw, where several men who had pushed ahead joined him. The others were shouldering through and the attempt to maintain a formation was completely defeated.

Col. Canham again stated, "Get down that hill while the fire is still on them or you will all get killed. Get moving with what you have got and the rest will follow you."

As the company commander moved off down the hill he saw Col. Canham pat a rifleman on the back and send him off down the narrow little path toward the bridge.

B Company men thus burst out of the draw onto a naked forward slope with no idea where they were, and found themselves overlooking the river between the regimental commander and the enemy. They saw the friendly artillery opposite and their first impulse was to get behind its cover. The presence of the regimental commander precluded any idea of going back into the draw.

The company descended the slope in an oblique line of running men, crossed the bridge past the burning tank and burst into the undergrowth to the left of the road, with no formation and in the greatest confusion. Visibility and even movement were reduced to a minimum, and now the SOP paid off. With no immediate directions and no previous orders the men began to shout to each other and get themselves sorted out. There was the greatest anxiety among them that the fire would move up the hill before they could get behind it and gain the maximum advantage of the sledgehammer blows on the Germans dug in above them.

During the course of the shouting and sorting out, the men began to work themselves into a state of high excitement. There were a few rifle shots. Several stunned, miserable enemy in the bottom of their holes had been killed. While the company commander was looking for the center of the nebulous formation, seldom being able to see more than one man at a time, the formation began to take shape and move forward, with the men still shouting to each other in the undergrowth. There was no firing except for two or three shots as the men flushed shell-torn targets in the underbrush.

The company moved into the first open field in a fairly adequate line during a brief pause in the artillery. Most of the men had fixed their bayonets. They ran across the field and waited for the men coming out of the undergrowth to join them. This was extremely fortunate, as six battalions of guns split the field in front of them wide open. Tactics thereafter were obvious and no one needed direction. When the fire lifted from a field the men

climbed over the rear hedgerow and crossed at a run. Then they waited for the fire to lift from the next field. The hedgerows, treasured by the defenders, were affording a great opportunity to the attackers to wring the last shred of advantage from the overpowering artillery. In open ground they could not have, as they later claimed, "lit their cigarettes from their own fire". The feeling of safety grew and the men began calling out as they ran across the fields. During each crossing they searched out the positions in the isolated scrub patches and along the hedgerows to bayonet and shoot the men inside. There were no wild bursts of firing, and the only wasted rounds were those pumped into the bodies of men already dead.

The German positions were scattered up the face of the slope, but fairly numerous and sited to be mutually protective. In one patch of growth the company commander saw two mortars and one light howitzer dug in. Two machine-gun positions covered these weapons. Riflemen were pausing briefly to pump a couple of rounds into each hole, and a rifle grenade silenced the one machine-gun that showed a flurry of activity. The company commander was convinced that two-thirds of the Germans "killed" on the slope were already dead. No prisoners were taken, due partially to the high state of excitement of the Americans, but primarily due to the lack of time for the stunned Germans to take either positive or negative action after the fire lifted before the Americans were on them.

The men were cheering generally as they leapt over the hedgerows and the company commander realized from the calls that he had several F Company men in the assault. These, seeing men running down the slope toward the river and knowing F Company was supposed to assault, had joined the advance.

Following the red wall of artillery, the men pushed their attack with the greatest spirit, excitement growing. They were engaged in an operation a squad of Wacs could have conducted success-

fully (the shell-fire had covered them across the stream and now all that was necessary was to stay close behind it), but the "assault idea", with which they had been so intensely indoctrinated for the Omaha operation, completely took possession of them and they howled up the slope.

The slope, which had been slightly concave, became convex toward the top, and the undergrowth became dense again. Likewise the German positions thinned out and disappeared. While the company was making its way through this last belt of undergrowth the artillery suddenly lifted over the crest of the ridge. In the ensuing hustle forward the 2d Platoon drifted too far to the left, and the 1st Platoon burst into the kitchen gardens on the crest and reached the hedgerows on the edge of the houses of Le Menil. The artillery fire seemed to have lifted altogether.

The lanes between the small group of houses were instantaneously filled with scurrying Germans who disappeared as the first rifle shots sounded. It is easy to overestimate the number in such a situation, and there could not have been more than a halfdozen. These B Company Commander presumed to be the small headquarters group for the enemy positions. The hostile rifle fire which came from the houses was extremely light and ceased with the discharge by the Americans of several rifle grenades. The company messenger was sent for the 2d Platoon, and the 1st Platoon moved into the village, heaving hand-grenades into the windows. This was a safety precaution, as no one believed there were any Germans left here, but no one wished to waste time checking. There was a frantic urge to get through the village before enemy artillery concentrated on it, and to form up along the hedgerows beyond the town against the expected counter-attack.

It was approximately 2100 when B Company reached Le Menil

and after the shadowy dusk of the slope, along the crest of the hill had seemed bright. A sudden overcast must have contributed to the shortness of the twilight, for it was deep dusk when the 1st Platoon reached the St. Jean-St. Clair road where it crossed the Couvains road immediately beyond the village.

Short range small arms fire began to build up from the hedgerows across the road intersection. The 1st Platoon returned this fire. The enemy fire built up with the quick burpings of machine-pistols while a few stragglers and the 2d Platoon filtered into the village and joined the line along the Northern Hedgerow. There was a sort of island, hedged in, at the intersection; thus the Americans and Germans were separated by four hedgerows and two narrow macadam lanes. The area of the village, as the most likely target for enemy artillery, was cleared, and in a moment, the messenger reported that the 1st Sergeant had moved forward and set up at the Northern edge of the village.

The hedgerows at the cross-roads, as the hedges were to be along the Couvains road for more than a mile to the South, were thick, grass-covered earth walls with no bushy growth. Thus rifle grenades were either sailing over the Germans' heads to explode harmlessly behind them, or splattering against the face of the thick earthen walls.

The enemy fire may have come from a small covering party, been the last gesture of the "headquarters group", or the beginnings of a counter-attack, but one of those fortunate accidents occurred which can make a limited success complete. It also made unnecessary the effort to zero in on an enemy beyond a 20-yard no-man's land with six rounds of 60mm. mortar, or a last assault.

The American artillery, which had appeared to be lifted altogether, came down with the full venom of its more than seventy guns precisely behind the enemy firing line. That did it. The

explosion knocked several Americans down, but miraculously no one was wounded. The fire-fight was abruptly terminated.

B Company Commander was preparing to move into position to cover the cross roads, and had sent for the 1st Sergeant and the radio when an American soldier burst out of the village, and began ordering the men to move out toward St. Clair. He stated he had orders from Lt. Col. Bingham (commanding the 2d Battalion, 116th). He identified himself as Sgt. Morgan, and was extremely excited and hypnotized by his own devotion to duty. It was with difficulty that he was persuaded that most of the men were from the 1st Battalion. He gathered the three or four F Company men together and set out through the dusk down the road to St. Clair. No one ever found out what happened to them.(72)

In the gathering darkness B Company moved into an orchard in the Southeast elbow of the cross-roads. The 1st Sergeant, after checking for casualties, reported two, one believed dead and one believed wounded. He reported more hand and rifle grenades were needed, but that every one had plenty of rifle ammunition.

Lts. Taylor and Varadian fanned out in a 90 degree arc in the orchard, each covering a road with a BAR. Sgt. "Toad" Smith sited his machine-gun on the interior platoon flanks, covering the hedgerows beyond the orchard, and his mortar in the corner of the hedgerows at the cross-roads. The rocketeer remained here on general call, and the CP was set up under an apple tree. The communication sergeant and radio operator finally broke into the net with emergency calls, and B Company Commander reported to Lt. Col. Metcalfe that he was on the objective. Lt. Col. Metcalfe acknowledged the message and signed off. As the feeling of isolation grew in the orchard B Company Commander tried to reach the battalion commander again, but the communications sergeant reported Lt. Col. Metcalfe was not at his radio.

(72) A-7; also. 2d Battalion officers questioned over a period of years.

NIGHT EXPLOITATION (See Map C)

Some time later (it must have been within the half hour, but seemed more) F Company, in column of deuces with no point, marched up the road from the bridge, and forced B Company Commander to come in with his hands up when he called to them from the cross-roads. This company agreed to outpost the far edge of the enormous orchard, and cover the St. Jean road, which left B Company free to straddle the Couvains road. The 1st Platoon, on the right, was fired on by a couple of riflemen and a machine-pistol, but this was wild fire in the darkness.

In less than an hour F Company received word to move out and join the 2d Battalion at the road "island", scene of the last firefight, on the road to St. Clair, (73) and once again B Company was left alone at the crossroads. There was a little sporadic German fire from the right front, but the Americans did not reply. To have done so would have been to waste ammunition and zero themselves in.

B Company Commander called Battalion again and expressed an urgent desire for company. Lt. Col. Metcalfe finally came to the radio with the information that he was being briefed by Col. Canham and would be across the river shortly. He stated he would bring more grenades.

Except for the feeling of military loneliness, morale was high in B Company. The men were proud of their conduct under the eyes of the regimental commander, and knew they had carried a position on the spur of the moment that had earlier blocked over a thousand men with ten tanks and nearly as much artillery as they had. They realized the artillery was not "spur of the moment", but were vain of their close use of it. When B Company Commander talked with men of the company in hospital later it (73) A-7.

was of this day they spoke rather than the Omaha assault.

At about 2230 or 2300 (74) Lt. Col. Metcalfe arrived with the rest of the battalion, and it assembled in the orchard, outposting for security. Manually carried grenades were broken down to Lts. Varadian and Taylor, and confirmation of one dead and one wounded, both attended by battalion medics, was received, as well as the news that no vehicles could cross the bridge until it was "de-tanked".

Lt. Col. Metcalfe briefed his company commanders in a house in Le Menil. The 2d Battalion would attack St. Clair, and the 1st Couvains. (75) The 3rd Battalion would occupy Le Menil and cover the rear and left. The 1st Battalion would move out in column of companies down the Couvains road, C, B, A and D. C would scout either side of the road from the point. The aid station and ammunition supply point were in vehicles North of the river, but would join the advance when the bridge was cleared. Radio silence. The battalion commander would be with A Company. Axis, the Couvains road.

The battalion moved out about midnight. As had been stated, the hedgerows in this immediate area were clear of growth, and the fields on either side of the road were open. The sky had cleared, but there was no moon. In the distance there was a flak-luftwaffe fight over Omaha and a burning plane went down several miles away. Locally the only sound was the shuffle of rubber on macadam. No one spoke, smoked or rattled equipment. No one wanted to. The battalion moved easily and rapidly for approximately two miles until it moved into an area where once again the crests of the hedgerows were thick with bushy growths and the fields were full of orchards, scrubby copses and clumps of trees appearing very dense in the darkness. C Company began (74) A-7; (75) A-7, "The 2d Battalion captured half of St. Clair at 0030."

to feel the strain of working in the tension of the unknown and its personnel became jumpy. The progress slowed and the interval between B and C Companies lessened.

The battalion had barely probed into this grown-up area when there was a frantic burst of white tracer on the right, a wild moment of firing and the sound of scuffling in the dark fields. Then there was firing on the left of the road. B Company "perimetered" in an oval between the hedgerows lining the road, and A Company did the same behind them. Personnel from C Company began to filter back into B Company, but were met by Lt. Col. Metcalfe who sent them back, and went forward himself to check on the trouble.

While C Company Commander began to straighten out the confusion on the right, fire began to build up along the left flank of the column, unaimed and wild, and appearing to originate with a few Germans rapidly changing positions. The main confusion still seemed to be right and forward. The left flank point, after a few moments of ducking up and down the opposite side of the same hedgerow the Germans were using, were brought under control. They drew in to form a screen on C Company's left flank and returned the harassing fire.

On the right a man broke away from the thrashing in the undergrowth and ran along the hedgerow. He was so closely pursued that Sgt. Smith, who was covering him with the machine-gun, could not fire. As the man ran he tossed grenades over the hedgerow on the road. These must have been the tiny, tin-covered concussion grenades, for they exploded with a blue spark and inflicted no casualties as they burst on the macadam. Two C Company men returned along the hedgerow in a moment and reported they had killed the German. This unknown grenadier was the only casualty in the fight, except, of course, for the unknown number of dead and wounded the

Germans carried with them as they withdrew".

Within a few moments C Company Commander had his right organized and the hostile firing diminished to occasional rounds fired to the left and right front. Lt. Col. Metcalf gathered his company commanders and asked for recommendations. These agreed with Captain Flora, the s-3, that to proceed further was to invite disaster, for the Germans could tie up the battalion with a handful and have it exhausted by dawn. Everyone was aware they were in the area where the 3rd Battalion, 115th Infantry, had been out up a few hours before, and all wished to be in a state of readiness to meet any emergency at daylight.

The commanding officer agreed and sent A Company to reconnoitre the last large open field to the right rear, fronting an enormous house, which developed to be not a chateau, but a Norman farm tenement of numerous two-storied apartments. The area was outposted, to include an orchard on the edge of the open zone with the object of denying the Germans close observation at dawn, and the battalion settled down in the house for the night. A wiring party from the Regiment brought wire forward and provided telephone communication, and Maj. Dallas, the battalion executive, fought the battle single-handed till daybreak, reconciling Regiment with the battalion's inactivity and plan to capture Couvains at dawn. (76)

Later a platoon of four tanks was sent forward over the now cleared bridge to join the battalion and supplemented the perimeter about the house.

Just prior to daybreak B Company personnel caught a German paratrooper in the house exchanging his camouflage smock for civilian clothes. It was presumed that if he had gotten into our cordon he could have gotten out, and that he must have been (76) A-7, "Battalion was directed to hold what they had and resume attack at daylight."

caught when the battalion invested the house. His capture served to restore the hope that the Germans had not determined the exact location or size of the force. When light revealed the effectiveness of the orchard screen included in the battalion's outposts, optimism grew.

CAPTURE OF COUVAINS (See Map C)

At dawn the battalion moved out in the formation of the night before with the tanks following the point. They were spaced along the column into B Company. The battalion commander was forward with C Company.

C Company swooped down on the same outpost it had fought the night before and scooped up several Germans. The advance guard continued down the road rapidly, working with great effectiveness. A quick-dodging point on the road drew sniper fire from the isolated little farm-houses on the road (loved by all outposts), which were quickly invested by flank patrols. The point moved on as a tank was whistled up with supporting riflemen. This time-saving, intelligence-saving manoeuvre^{*} was employed three times in the quick passage of about three quarters of a mile. Some Germans undoubtedly got back to Couvains, but from subsequent developments these could not have carried any accurate word of the force down the road.

The tops of the stone houses of Couvains loomed above the hedgerows several hundred yards away when C Company ran into a fairly sustained rifle fire. The tanks moved forward between the hedgerows arterializing their movement, and started into the straightaway leading into the village, with C Company riflemen behind them.

They were moving into an excellent alley, but poor fire discipline saved them. German anti-tank gunners fired too soon

* MANOEUVRE

and inaccurately, and the tanks backed up, ^{repeatedly} ~~repelling~~ the adventure of the Elle bridge. Flat trajectory shells and mortars began breaking along the road, and the battalion commander requested the tanks to knock the observers out of the upstairs windows of Couvains.

The tanks moved into a narrow lane perpendicular to the road and, in hull defilade, opened up on the windows and rooftops with concrete piercing rounds while C Company deployed right and B Company left, sheltering from the hostile bursts against the hedgerows and in roadside ditches. The shell and mortar fire continued, but was poorly adjusted and the fragmentation effect of the shells was poor. A German firing line began to build up in front of the town on the left (East) of the road. The town extended further North here, and C Company, moving Southward West of the road, reached a junction where a road went Northwest to St. Clair before commanded the Northwest approach to the large village.

Meanwhile the battalion train, consisting of two jeeps and trailers carrying the battalion aid station and ammunition supply, joined the tail of the column. With them was a forward observer from Cannon Company, authorized to employ both guns the company had managed to get ashore on D Day, (77) and these were brought to bear on the village. Both battalion 81 mm. mortars joined the fight. It is possible the enemy mistook the concentration for registration fire, and wished to avoid the misfortune of the evening previous. They did not distinguish themselves by their subsequent conduct.

At this moment the decision to attack was precipitated by the arrival of the regimental commander, who dismounted from the jeep that had brought him from witnessing the capture of St. Clair by the 2d Battalion. (78) Lt. Col. Metcalfe ordered (77) A-7; (78) A-7.

a two-company attack on either side of the road, B left and C right, the companies to proceed parallel through the village and secure its Southern and Southwestern boundaries. A Company was directed to secure the St. Jean and St. Clair roads leading Northeast and Northwest from Couvains.

Both assaulting companies moved out immediately. Baker ~~swung~~ in a wide arc into the hedged orchards just North of the St. Jean road, and cut back onto the flank of the German firing line on the Northern edge of town. In passage they were fired on by snipers on the left (presumably the St. Jean road outpost), but "bulled through", running low against the hedgerows nearest the snipers until these were bypassed.

Enemy personnel on the edge of Couvains scattered into the houses at the first shot, and as the platoons moved forward they were engaged with fire, took cover and began beating up windows with rifle grenades. Vehicles could be heard moving out to the South and B Company began to organize teams to rush and clear houses. This was not necessary, as there was a burst of firing from the right, and the fire from the front ceased suddenly. C Company had crossed the St. Clair road, followed hedgerows into a deep draw on the Northwestern edge of the road-center, and followed the draw into town, nearly capturing the anti-tank guns. B Company immediately moved forward to join C, scattering hand-grenades into the houses generously as a precautionary measure. A couple of Germans were killed and a couple captured, but when B and C Company Commanders met at the Southern edge of the village the forward riflemen were firing at Germans scurrying to cover across the fields. C Company Commander shot at a German who fell at the feet of B Company Commander. This "dead man", when revived by a rifleman, proved to be an intelligent, well equipped, neatly dressed soldier in excellent physical condition.

He gave the impression of being a clerk from a superior line unit, and was indentified as 352d Division. This bit of information garnered from this man before he shut up helped to furnish the German picture in this operation, although his vitality spoiled the day for C Company Commander.

C Company Commander stated he was going to organize between the St. Jean road the La Calvaire road. B Company moved around the edge of Couvains to secure the area between the La Calvaire road and a minor macadam road angling Southwest through the hedgerows and copses, a bitter battleground within a week, to the St. Lo-St. Clair road.

The company immediately came under intense mortar fire, but sheltered in ditches along the hedgerows with only one casualty. B Company Commander sent Lt. Taylor back through Couvains to find Captain Flora, the B-3, and find out what disposition the battalion commander wished to make. This officer was no sooner gone than the Germans unloaded on Couvains.(79) The village was already cleared, and the only casualty was Lt. Taylor, who managed to crawl out of the boiling town and find the aid station-CP North of town.

Deciding Lt. Taylor was dead, B Company Commander took advantage of a lull in the mortar fire to redispse the company more favorably. This was accomplished by passing directions as to exact positions among the men prior to a concerted move which was made at the double, including the evacuation of the wounded man. The movement brought down the mortar barrage again, but the men squirmed to covered positions along the reverse side of hedgerows and no one was hit.

(79) A-7; "The Krauts unloaded plenty. They tracked Howie and me down the road, both on foot. Only damage done; one chunk of shrapnel through my jacket".

B Company Commander left the company under cover with Lt. Varadian, and went with his messenger to find Lt. Col. Metcalfe or Captain Flora. Skirting the town, which was intensely bombarded with big stuff for more than an hour, he found the battalion CP, where Lt. Taylor was receiving plasma and where the wounded soldier was shortly brought in. Couvains had cost B Company only two wounded, but it was hard to lose Lt. Taylor, which left exactly one rifle platoon leader in the battalion who had crossed the beach with the outfit.

Lt. Col. Metcalfe directed a perimeter, with C and A Companies to hold what they had, B Company was to pull in and tie with C Company on the edge of town and with A Company on the St. Clair road.

B Company Commander returned to the company, which was having a rest from the mortar fire, and moved it behind the hedgerows back into its assigned area. While these dispositions were being made B Company recovered several wounded 3rd Battalion, 115th Infantry, personnel, left on the field the day before, in a deserted enemy aid station.

The Germans continue to harass the whole area with mortar, howitzer and flat fire. Within the hour a great deal of flat trajectory 88 mm. fire was landing about the road center. Enemy patrols, small, but aggressive, began probing around the battalion and three Germans were killed in A Company area.

The Battalion Commander directed Lt. Varadian to take a patrol to the Southwest, the apparent growing center of German strength, and his patrol was fired on by automatic weapons when it reached a point just beyond the limit of B Company's initial advance.

Later in the afternoon the 3rd Battalion of the 115th, now attached to the 116th and once again across the river, was disposed between the 2d Battalion's positions around St. Clair and

and the 1st Battalion's at Couvains, facing Southwest along the St. Clair-Couvains road. Though shaky, this battalion did its job and there was no more infiltration on the 1st Battalion's right flank. Later the 3rd Battalion, 116th, moved through Couvains and outposted immediately facing the Germans to the Southwest. Some time later the 115th took over St. Clair and its own 3rd Battalion. The 2d Battalion, 116th, was moved due South to outpost along the La Calvaire road. Liason was established with the 2d American Division via the St. Jean de Savigny road.(80) The Couvains salient was established.

It is little more than three miles from the edge of Couvains to the outskirts of St. Lo. It is the same distance from the positions North of the Elle to Couvains. The 116th Infantry, attacking the evening of 12 June, captured Couvains before noon of 13 June. St. Lo was to fall on 18 July.

Two attacks pronged from Couvains within the week, both made by the 1st Battalion. One, through the 3rd Battalion lines, paid heavily in casualties for lodgement on the St. Lo-St. Clair road. The 3rd Battalion took over these positions, delivering them in turn to the 115th, who had hardly advanced them ~~an~~ ^{and} ~~ment~~ ^{later} when the 29th's Task Force C, organized near Couvains, slipped down the Southwest road, through these positions and into the city against "sniper opposition".(81) The second attack was due South from Couvains from the 2d Battalion's lines. A surprise assault at high noon and a vicious fight with German paratroopers, leaving most of them dead, won thus a position commanding the forward slope of Hill 192 from the West.(82) Nearly four weeks later the 116th drove South to cut out the Bayeux road and isolate Hill 192, which fell to the 2d Division the next day. The 116th then swung West to lodge itself in the suburbs of St. Lo, which was evacuated when days of counter-attack failed and a supply route was re-established by the 116th itself through encircling enemy.(83)

(80) A-7; (81,83) A-6, pp.107-117; (82) Personal Knowledge.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

Attack of the 115th: This attack, initiated on sound, orthodox lines, with ample artillery support properly distributed among the forward elements, and utilizing well-trained troops, rapidly degenerated into an example of the wrong way to do everything. The failure seems chiefly characterized by poor co-ordination, poor control and poor judgement.

After the 1st Battalion's failure to cross in the initial effort at Le Menil there was no immediate attempt to flank and envelop this redoubt and no attempt to neutralize it for an assault by massing artillery. However, let us grant this failure as legitimate.

The 3rd Battalion, after the first failure, found a weak spot and succeeded in crossing the river. This success, isolated, unsupported and undirected, was allowed to continue its hedgerow Little Big Horn while the 1st continued to ram its head against a stone wall.

While the reserve remained uncommitted, the success was cut off and disintegrated while the stalemated 1st Battalion employed tanks in a frontal attack across a fire-covered defile. A child would have sited anti-tank guns to cover this bridge. A grown man might have anticipated such a disposition in a defence that had shown itself well equipped and strong. Granting that infantrymen could not advance with success against the effective fire of massed machine-guns, mortars and light howitzers supported with artillery, and that no shock force can advance with success against weapons capable of immediately neutralizing it, there seems to have been no effort to find another way to reduce Le Menil. An ample artillery support was thrown around profligately, its strength dispersed in uncoordinated efforts throughout the day.

Throughout the day the reserve was not employed. If the replacements cancelled the 2d Battalion as a fighting force, they should not have been permitted to join in. However, this cannot be accepted as a legitimate excuse during a period of such dire necessity. Nor can the destructive engagement of the night 10-11 June excuse the failure to commit this battalion. Under new regimental command the 3rd Battalion, 115th. was fighting effectively on 13 June in spite of what happened to it on the 12th. Likewise, four battalions of the 16th and 116th Infantries had left their best blood on Omaha Beach and continued fighting without a break. The 1st Battalion, 116th, had fought last at Gefosse Fontenay, failed miserably, crossed the Aure with its 20% strength and breeched the Elle and captured Couvains. There is no excuse for the failure to commit effectively the 2d Battalion, 115th.

To sum up, the 1st Battalion^{115 INF} showed no initiative and poor judgement (Battalion's fault) and committed tanks to be wasted in a futile effort (Battalion's and Regiment's fault), and never properly used supporting artillery (Battalion's and Regiment's fault).

The 3rd Battalion¹¹⁵ crossed a tank barrier and proceeded blindly (Regiment's fault) without proper support, failing to secure a tank crossing (Regiment's Fault) and destroy the force opposing the right flank (Regiment's fault). It disintegrated under attack, showing poor control (Battalion's fault), and retreated piecemeal with no one seeming to know exactly what was happening (Battalion's and Regiment's fault).

The reserve^{2d 115 INF} remained uncommitted (Regiment's fault).

It is unfortunate that military mediocrity, in the circumstances of preparing to fight and against light opposition, can offer an adequate job, making its existence tolerable until the moment of

the critical test. Superior commanders should impose the most rigid tests to discover the leaders who embody those qualities that have ensured the survival of the human race, adaptability, moral force and the ability to achieve concerted action.

The German defense: Initially there is little to criticize in this economical and effective defense of a river fordable by foot-troops and constituting a tank barrier. The bridge-crossings were fortresses, with reserves waiting to strike any successful crossing between them.

The defense seems to have relaxed, however, and been caught off balance by the twilight effort of the 116th. In view of the mass superiority of the surprise American artillery and the speed of the follow up, the lodgement across the river may be excused.

Poor judgement was shown in leaving Couvains uncovered and throwing the reserve at St. Clair, already a dead pigeon. We may excuse the commander for attempting to recapture St. Clair, but we cannot excuse him for the failure to resolutely patrol toward Le Menil, after his outposts reported movement on this road, to determine the exact threat here. A good dawn patrol would have discovered a battalion with tanks, and the reserve could have saved Couvains, probably for days, by being recalled down the road from St. Clair.

It may have been necessary to employ non-combat personnel in garrisoning Couvains, but some one should have been placed in command capable of organizing and carrying out a resolute defense, and capable of properly employing the artillery and heavy mortars massed South of the road-center. The defense of Couvains was not good enough. Attacking troops were allowed to walk into town up a draw. Other attacking troops could have been mowed down by the SP guns after they masked their own tanks. The artillery and

mortars that made any further exploitation impossible could have denied the approaches. Granting that second-rate troops will break and run from the muzzles of assaulting rifles, if the forces in Couvains had been properly disposed and supporting fire properly used the clerks and cooks there could have been saved the emotional shock of meeting assault troops muzzle to muzzle.

Once the reserve was pulled in from St. Clair it wasted time patrolling before it struck. Then it was too late. The seizure was organized and reinforced. The night of 13 June the hedges beyond Couvains were full of fallschirmjaguars, panzergrenadiers, tanks, machine-guns and mortars. There seems to be no excuse for the failure of the reserve to strike at Couvains as soon as it was in position. LXXXIVth Corps must have known it had those troops to commit here. I hate to think how easily Couvains could have been recaptured, since Division had taken our artillery, and our tanks had evaporated, and the artillery and mortar fire had prevented any immediate break-down of reserve ammunition.

The attack of the 116th: I consider this attack a miniature masterpiece in penetration, double development and exploitation, which won a success of more than miniature significance.

Committed on the spur of the moment with little time to work prior to darkness, the regimental commander made his estimate and decision, launched his attack and controlled and co-ordinated it perfectly, and organized his gains to stick.

With insufficient time to develop an envelopment at Le Manil, he took maximum advantage of the capabilities of his support, massing the flexible artillery and following it up with a beautifully timed assault. Though the prepared assault failed to materialize, he was on hand to rectify this failure immediately

and force the assault through. The immediate follow up displays masterful control and co-ordination. The resultant success and organization of this success seems to me to leave little to be desired. His advance battalions were reinforced with tanks, and he himself was on hand to force his developing attack to its logical conclusion.

Wiring parties were seeking out battalions in the middle of a hostile night, supporting attachments were coming forward to join them, and he himself was on hand at the moment of critical action to develop his plan to fit the changing circumstances of the battlefield.

On 12 June, 1944, at the Elle River were the examples of the right way and the wrong way to attack with a regiment.

Later in the 504th Parachute Infantry I saw this manoeuvre repeated numerous times, the initial penetration either passing through positions considered impenetrable or over ground considered impassable, and the whole regiment pouring through the gap in single file to fan out and develop the attack.

Speed. Mobility. Surprise. Co-ordination. Critical mass superiority at the critical point. Flexibility to develop. The annihilation of the enemy. The troops who defended St. Lo were not the same men who defended the lower Elle River, with the exception of the mobile reserve and most of the clerical garrison of Couvains. The rest, with a few light footed exceptions, were dead or prisoners.

LESSONS

The attack must be flexible, co-ordinated and controlled.

Success may be isolated and destroyed if it is unsupported.

~~A partial success should be directed toward the completion~~
of the whole success.

An attack across a barrier is not successful until a crossing has been secured making available all types of supporting

equipment.

Shock action in a limited zone against resolutely employed fire capable of neutralizing it will fail.

All available resources must be exhausted before failure is admitted.

The momentum of the attack may be regained by the commitment of fresh troops.

High trajectory and the ability to mass with instruments enables artillery to bring a surprise concentration against an alerted enemy.

Critical mass superiority may be attained at a single point by the attacker against an overall superior enemy to force a penetration.

Mass superiority is not always measured in numbers of men, but may be attained in units of fire.

Fire superiority is not successful until it is exploited with shock action.

Successful shock action with inferior numbers may be attained with fire superiority.

Speed and surprise are qualities of successful shock action.

The bayonet is not yet obsolete.

The position of the commander is where he can best direct the attack during the changing of circumstances of battle, exercise control and stimulate subordinate leaders and troops.

The penetration must be developed to ensure its permanent success.

Speed in developing a penetration is essential.

An assault completed at nightfall leaves the enemy taking countermeasures in the confusion of darkness.

The night following a successful attack is excellent for exploitation.

Skillful use of terrain reduces incidental casualties to a minimum.

A night attack against resistance requires definite objectives and some knowledge of the enemy dispositions for the best chance of success.

A meeting engagement in the darkness is prone to develop into a standing fire-fight.

Armor will add momentum to the exploitation.

Armor, when its shock action is neutralized, may provide a base of fire for attacking foot troops.

An apparently strong defense may crumble at the touch. Delay is unjustified without a testing attack.

Terrain considered to favor the attacker may enable the attacker to gain spectacular success.

The successes of an attack must be quickly organized and made capable of defence to endure.

Overall: The attack should be bold, flexible, co-ordinated and designed to exploit surprise with speed, utilizing supporting arms to the limit of their capabilities to ensure successful shock action which may be developed to take advantage of every natural and artificial circumstance in attaining vital objectives and the destruction of the enemy, prepared at all times to defend what it has taken.

The Defense:

No defense can permanently halt an adequately strong, determined, intelligent enemy equipped with neutralizing weapons.

When a defense is no longer effective in its mission and is threatened with destruction, it should evacuate immediately to fight another day.

Counter-attack should be held until the main threat develops and then launched without delay.

Every means should be used to determine the main thrust during a break-through.

The improperly organized defense is no defense against
a determined enemy.